

Spiritual Nationalism: Unraveling Aurobindo Ghosh's Influence on Indian Freedom Struggle

*¹Vikash Kumar Meena and ²Arti Devi

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University

²Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University

Abstract

Aurobindo Ghosh the great Indian nationalist, freedom fighter, poet, philosopher and political leader focused on the combination of spirituality and nationalism, stressing the idea that political freedom can be achieved only in a spiritually awakened society. He emphasized on the notion that mere political independence cannot make a nation free in a real sense and it is only because of spiritual renaissance that can develop a nation. Aurobindo believed in the philosophy of 'integral nationalism' which is a combination of political, cultural and spiritual dimensions of a nation in which an individual acts as a whole. Therefore, the present study will explore the concept of spiritual nationalism as developed by Aurobindo Ghosh. While delving into Ghosh's philosophical and spiritual ideas, this study seeks to unravel how his thoughts shaped the Indian national movement. This study also focused on Ghosh's role in shaping the ideological dimension of the Indian freedom struggle against British colonial rule. The present study highlights the role played by Ghosh in the Indian freedom struggle in which the main tool was spiritual nationalism. The paper begins by delving into the life and works of Aurobindo Ghosh, emphasizing his spiritual philosophy and its integration into the nationalist discourse. It also provides a historical context for the emergence of spiritual nationalism within the Indian National Movement, highlighting the socio-political conditions of the time. This paper primarily focuses on the political ideas of Ghosh and his contribution in the Indian Freedom Struggle with the lens of spiritual nationalism.

Keywords: *Spiritual Nationalism, Aurobindo Ghosh, Indian freedom struggle*

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*Author's Correspondence

 Vikash Kumar Meena

 Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of Political Science,
Banaras Hindu University

 vikkumeena1@gmail.com

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Introduction

Aurobindo Ghosh was born in Calcutta on 15th August 1872, was one of the most prominent Indian nationalists, freedom fighter, and philosopher. His father, Krishna Dhun Ghose completed his studies in England from where he returned fully anglicized in nature and character. He was so much influenced by Western culture that he wanted his children to become a part of that culture and tried his best to keep them away from the influence of Indian traditions and culture. As a result of which he enrolled Aurobindo Ghosh in the Loreto Convent School at Darjeeling at the age of 5. At the age of 7 he was sent to England to complete his studies and the rest of the education he received from St. Paul's school, London and later from King's College, Cambridge. At a very early age, in University of Cambridge, he learnt different foreign languages like Greek, French, Italian, German, Latin, and Spanish but was still unaware of his mother tongue. It is in Cambridge where Ghosh begins his initial political activities. When Ghosh became aware of the subjection of India against foreign rule, he joined a radical group

namely 'The Indian Majlis' at Cambridge University. Later he along with his brother Benoy Bhushan founded a revolutionary group of Indians in London. Also, in 1892 before coming to India, Aurobindo Ghosh and Benoy Bhushan both joined a secret society viz; "Lotus and Dagger"¹. It was his father's will that Aurobindo takes the ICS examination, he even passed the examination and attained a rank of 11th out of total 250 candidates but he declined to do ICS and after returning to India he joined Baroda Civil Services in 1893 and served there till 1907.

Dr. Karan Singh who called Aurobindo Ghosh as Prophet of Indian Nationalism divided Ghosh's life into two phases first from 1893 to 1910 and second from 1910 to till his death in 1950. The first one deals with the political journey of Aurobindo Ghosh while the second one highlights his spiritual turn of life. In the first phase he published various journals and articles to quote few are "New Lamps for Old" published in the journal "Indu Prakash", he also started the journal 'Bande Matram' and the journal 'Karmayogi'. In this phase he criticized congress and its activities, its way of bargaining with the British, their policies of appeasement and thus became a very strong critic of moderates (Singh, 1980). Later after the Surat session he led the extremist group of congress. Although in a strict sense the political career of Ghosh was only for 5 years from 1905 i.e. after the partition of Bengal till 1910 i.e till his spiritual turn which is the consequence of his conviction in the Alipore Bomb case. In 1910 when he fled from British India to Pondicherry, a French territory, it is here when he completely devoted his life towards spiritualism. Here Ghosh devoted his life completely to 'Integral Yoga'² and the purpose of integral yoga is not to denounce worldly practices but a radical change among humans while living in it. But Aurobindo's vision of spiritual nationalism wanted to bring independence which is having its purpose higher than political independence because he is of the view that one can not develop to his fuller potential under the foreign rule³. Therefore, the present study wants to trace the role which Aurobindo Ghosh played in India's Freedom struggle in which spiritual nationalism acts as the main tool.

Concept of spiritual nationalism

Sri Aurobindo proposed the concept of spiritual nationalism. He emphasized on a blend of spiritual values with the socio-political dimensions of nationalism to foster a higher consciousness and unity among the masses. He laid the stress on that spiritual nationalism is the essence of united and harmonious India. Spiritual Nationalism is the combination of two words spiritual and nationalism and these two are the pillars on which lies the essence of this concept and both are interrelated and supplementary in nature. The first concept is of the nation and the second one is of spiritualism and for him the nation is not merely a piece of territory or something political but it is much beyond that, it is a divine concept.¹ He termed the nation as mother India.

Thus, from here we can locate that Sri Aurobindo's concept of nationalism is non-conventional in nature. It is not conventional because it goes beyond the traditional concept of focusing wholly on the socio-political institutions while spiritual nationalism simultaneously emphasizes on individuals and society (Rana and Lal, 2023). Thus, this principle of spiritual nationalism challenged the conventional Western-centric approaches to nationalism. Also, Aurobindo stressed on the significance of Gita and Upanishads and proclaimed that every Indian should feel proud of its rich and diverse cultural history (ibid.). Aurobindo believes that nations are the creation of God and they are supposed to be independent; to live under colonial rule is against the will of God and it is the primary duty of everyone to fight against the colonial and to constantly strive for self-rule (Singh, 2002). Therefore, he opposed colonialism and his message was that no nation can progress under the foreign rule and therefore it is the duty assigned by God to achieve independence and one has to sacrifice everything for the nation's independence. He was never in favor of dominion status of India and staunchly criticized the policies of moderates and even dubbed their rule as rule of blinds (Singh, 1980) and he wanted to achieve Purna Swaraj not by demanding from the British but by fighting against them.³ Aurobindo called nationalism as a "holy yajnya" (ritual) which is much more than political activity and for achieving this higher purpose he even recommends the use of violence. He was a radical

¹ <https://www.himpub.com/documents/Chapter335.pdf>

² <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/sri-aurobindo-1>

³ <https://www.saraswatiias.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/AUROBINDOFinal-pdf-copy.pdf>

and he proclaimed that if our nation (mother) is being exploited then one is fully allowed to use violence for ending that exploitation (Singh, 2002: 25).

Sri Aurobindo's nationalism was not even limited to any religion or to any territory; it is applicable for the whole of humanity and he didn't make any differences on the basis of ethnicity, caste, creed, or religion. Whatever the immediate aim of nationalism, the ultimate aim for him is to achieve higher ideals of humanity (Rana and Lal, 2023: 334). He never treated India's freedom as an end and for him emancipation of the human race is the ultimate aim. Also, there is an astonishing coincidence that India achieved independence on the birth date of Sri Aurobindo i.e. on 15th of August.

Political thought of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh

Sri Aurobindo Ghosh is primarily recognized for his spiritualism but his political thought played a remarkable significance in the Indian freedom struggle. He has contributed to Indian political thought in the early 20th century which reflects a unique blend of western political ideas and eastern spirituality. Aurobindo strongly criticized colonial rule in India and fully agreed that the west lacked moral values. But at the same time, he recognizes the value of their political ideas and strongly recommends a synthesis of ancient vedanta and modern European political philosophy (Varma, 1955). He put forward the idea of 'political vedantism' which is a concrete social philosophy for the reconstruction of the social and political life of a dependent nation and is not merely a restatement of the world-affirming tendencies of the Upanishads (Varma, 1955:235) and the ultimate aim is the unity of man and God. At the same time he believed in the notion of spiritual nationalism with the help of which he wanted to fuel the souls of masses with the fire for independence. On his return to India Aurobindo felt the need to learn his mother tongue in order to connect with the people and he began digging texts for this reason. He studied Geeta and Upanishads and realized their importance in practical life. Here he got influenced by the Bankim Chandra song Bandematram and being influenced by him Sri Aurobindo developed a feeling of radical nationalism (Haldar, 1972). As Aurobindo was a revolutionary, he never cared about means and put the whole emphasis on end (Haldar, 1972:63). For him the end goal was the nation's independence and for this even the use of violence is justified. It can be achieved with the participation of masses and with sacrifices of each and everyone. The incident of partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in the year of 1905 proved a blessing in disguise for Sri Aurobindo because this event fueled the spirit of Ghosh with militant revolutionism and from here began his political career in the Indian national movement goal of which is not only to achieve political independence from British but emancipation of human life as well. Thus, he developed a vision of integral nationalism whose aim is not only political or economic governance but also the development of moral and spiritual spheres. For Aurobindo education along with spiritual nationalism is the important weapon to achieve the higher purpose of life. He developed his educational philosophy on the basis of vedanta and upanishads (Hussain and Yadav, 2018). Education should be provided to an individual in such a way that it can bring all round development to an individual (ibid.) and to inculcate these multiple all-round dimensions in human beings is basically the integral education (Saini, 2017). Aurobindo believes that everybody innately born with a potential and need is only to bring it out.

Aurobindo's political thought evolved over time, later he delved more towards spiritualism and integral consciousness.

Role of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh in Indian freedom struggle

Sri Aurobindo played a very remarkable role in the Indian freedom struggle in a very unique way. He contributed to the national movement right after returning to India from England; firstly with the help of his writings and later by actively participating in politics especially after the partition of Bengal. For the independence of India, he worked as a fierce thinker by means of his secret publications (Yadav, 2021). Articles of Aurobindo were quite radical which created sensation among youth. To quote few he published an article titled 'No compromise' and in 1906 by means of a Bengali newspaper titled 'Yugantar' he preached open revolt and demanded complete independence¹. He was against the policies and way of working of congress. He criticized the demand of moderates for dominion status and in turn fought for poorna Swaraj and self-rule. Aurobindo criticized congress's methodologies and working

policies in his 'New lamps of old' in *Indu Prakash* magazine (Yadav, 2021: 6456). He was of the view that congress is a defective organization and their rule is equivalent to the rule of blinds (Singh, 1980). After the Surat split of congress, he joined the extremist group of congress and was radically working for Indian independence. In 1908 Aurobindo was accused in the Alipore bomb case on charges of conspiracy to wage a war against the British Government. He was released after a long trial and in 1910 he shifted to Pondicherry where his revolutionary phase of life got replaced with philosophical and spiritual tendencies.

Although the active political phase of Ghosh's life is for a very little period, he played a significant role in the Indian freedom struggle, initially he contributed by way of revolutionary activities and later with his spiritual tendencies and thus influenced the national movement intellectually.

Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo's impact on the Indian freedom struggle was very deep, shaping the unique blend of spiritual nationalism and political activism. His combination of spiritualism and activism not only wanted to liberate mother India from colonial subjugation but also from the internal strife. He emphasized that the primary goal is to achieve independence but his definition of independence is more broad than mere political independence and its one important dimension is emancipation of humans and realization of higher purpose in life. He stressed on inner transformation and the spiritual awakening of individuals which remarkably contributed to the broader quest for India's independence. His various writings also inspired youth to unite for the ultimate purpose of Indians. The ideas of Ghosh not only motivated the freedom fighters but also fueled the masses with spirit to fight for independence. Although Ghosh withdrew from active politics, his vision for free India kept motivating everyone for India's freedom struggle.

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Author's Biography:

Vikash kumar meena has received his bachelor of Art in political science from university of Rajasthan Jaipur, Rajasthan, India; master of Arts in political science from Banaras Hindu university, Varanasi. Currently he is pursuing his phd in same subject. His research area is Indian Indian governance and politics, political theory, media studies. Focused specially on Role of social media in politics. He has published several enlightening articles in this field.

Arti Devi is a PhD research scholar at the Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. She has completed her masters in Political Science from University of Jammu in 2021. She qualified UGC NET JRF in Political Science in 2022. Besides this she also qualified Jammu and Kashmir State Eligibility Test in 2022. Currently she is working on the representation of Kashmir in Bollywood. Her research interests include gender studies, film studies, foreign policy and popular culture.

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